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ABSTRACT

Despite the immense pressure to redesign academic programs so that they have more vocational training appeal, members of the postsecondary academic community need to assert that a liberal arts education is the best education for all undergraduates, including communication majors. Despite its lack of direct vocational training, a liberal arts education is the best lifelong career preparation for several reasons. First, liberal arts study provides skills and encourages attitudes that are vital to all careers. With emphasis on speaking, writing, analytical and critical thinking, and awareness and examination of assumptions, liberal arts courses prepare all students for the myriad work situations in which they will eventually find themselves. Second, as we live more in an economic "global village," it is increasingly important to be able to work with understanding and appropriate skills across national and language boundaries. Third, narrow vocational skills become obsolete quickly, but skills in liberal arts, do not become outdated. Fourth, liberal arts study provides students with a broader perspective on problems and decisions, serving them well in their personal and professional lives. Finally, while science and technology are, in a narrow sense, neutral, their application involves profoundly moral issues. Liberal arts study in its best form provides dynamic opportunities for continued examination of difficult ethical questions. (HTH)

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Tensions Between Training Career Professionals and Educating Persons for Lifelong Learning

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For colleges and universities wanting to maintain and develop quality programs in times of economic tightening and declining numbers of college-aged students, resisting the plunge into easily marketable vocational training is not easy. An academic program designed for career training in which majors are exclusively trained for "learning a living" has become increasingly attractive because of its appeal to job-seekers. In communication this vocational trend is most visible in programs such as media production and in those few organizational communication programs which limit classes solely to those which have immediate and direct applicability to business. Yet despite the immense pressures to redesign academic programs so that they have more vocational-training appeal, members of the postsecondary academic community need to assert that a liberal arts education is the best education for all undergraduates including communication majors. Secondarily, in the long term, a liberal arts education, despite its lack of direct vocational training, is the best preparation for a lifelong career. We should concur with Frank Rhodes, president of Cornell University, who said, " . . . (a) broad foundation in the liberal arts is the best career education available in a decade of increased technology" (1984).

Historically, of course, American colleges from their origins were grounded in a thorough study of the liberal arts. Education focused on theology, medicine, law, and the classics. Vocational training occurred in the context of various apprenticeships. The colonial period through the 1800's were typical of an American understanding of colleges as providing non-professional and non-technical education in

the arts and sciences (Rudolph, 1984). These early institutions by their very nature lacked egalitarian orientation; and they adopted an overtly Christian perspective for the classical curriculum. They were not designed to have widespread appeal or to provide specific professional training.

By the mid-1800's, at the same time that the Industrial Revolution was creating such enormous changes in other areas of society, universities were also influenced by the pressure to become more responsive to societal needs. The curriculum fairly soon became more adaptive to vocational needs of its students. Frederick Rudolph, professor of history at Williams College, argues that from this time on, " . . . neither coherence in the course of study nor clarity of mission would again be possible" (1984). Where the classics and pure sciences had once stood alone at the center of the curriculum of early postsecondary institutions, now these liberal arts courses were offered alongside more vocationally-oriented classes. Today it is not considered unusual whatsoever for a student to be enrolled in a philosophy course and a film production course during the same semester.

Increasingly colleges and universities have moved to a corporate model designed to be more responsive to the needs and wants of the market. Students are now often seen as consumers, and the curriculum has become a smorgasbord of offerings. Students and their parents frequently "shop around" to find the "best bargain," sometimes even the "cheapest bargain" as they select courses. The competitive marketing orientation of postsecondary institutions has been particularly responsive to the interests of students who represent a bulge in the

baby boom, a demographic reality which makes it more difficult for them to secure jobs. Moreover, the universities are increasingly dependent on tuition money for their own budget needs. National Institute of Education reports that public institutions rely on student enrollment figures for 75% of their monetary needs while private institutions secure 50% of their budget income from enrollments. This dependence on enrollment figures for literal survival has pressured institutions even more to offer what the customers will buy. The most traditional classical courses of study, including rhetoric, have been modified by the needs of the institutions to offer more applied courses of study.

At the same time that institutional survival has forced the colleges and universities to offer more marketable curricula, almost incredible advances in technology have occurred. There is no need to elaborate on what some of these technical changes are, nor to make the case that they have affected the very nature of our existence. Their presence complicates the fundamental question that underlies the argument in this presentation, that being, what does a person need to study in order to be well educated? Related to that basic issue, what does a person need to study in order to find productive work?

Despite marketedly lower salaries for liberal arts graduates and despite a dramatic drop in the numbers of students declaring majors in the liberal arts from 49% in 1971 to 36% in 1982 (Scully, 1984), students should, nonetheless, be encouraged to study the liberal arts. The National Institute of Education Report which was released in the fall of 1984 when this paper was first prepared, was highly critical of the lack of attention given to liberal arts in most American colleges and universities. That report (Scully, 1984), noted that "The college

curriculum has become excessively vocational in its orientation, and bachelor's degree has lost its potential to foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society." The report proceeded to recommend that all bachelor's degrees, whether in public or private institutions, should include two full years of liberal art courses.

Studying the liberal arts offers students familiarity with a basic body of knowledge and with exposure to important thinking skills which will serve them well whether or not they pursue vocational work in specific liberal arts positions. First, liberal arts study provides skills and encourages attitudes that are vital to all careers. With emphasis on speaking, writing, analytical and critical thinking, and awareness and examination of assumptions, liberal arts courses prepare all students for the myriad work situations in which they will eventually find themselves. A recruiter for New England Telephone said that "We need managers who can deal with diverse situations, and liberal arts students are perfect for that because they've had a diverse education" (Rhodes, 1984). Not all recruiters, of course, agree with that perspective: instead, they look for the most highly specialized technicians for the job. Top-level executives, however, are widely quoted for their commitments to hiring liberal arts graduates who typically bring a broader, more insightful perspective to their work. Rudolph Weingartner, Dean of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University, sees the differences in point of view about who is the best candidate for the job, the technician or the liberal arts graduate, as a fundamental intellectual problem which points to a lack of coherence in cultural and economic expectations (Jacobson,

January, 1986). A survey of undergraduate students which appeared in a February, 1986 issue of Chronicle of Higher Education pointed to this same ambivalence. In the Carnegie Foundation survey, 76.5% of the undergraduates surveyed said that general studies courses helped them understand other courses; 74.2% said that the general studies curriculum helped to prepare them for a "lifelong learning;" but 39.2% considered general studies courses to be irrelevant to subjects they were most interested in (Jacobson, February, 1986). Nonetheless, there is little tacit disagreement that liberal arts learning provides a helpful and important framework of fundamental knowledge and skills which are vital for all careers.

Second, as we live more in an economic "global village," it is increasingly important that we be able to work with understanding and appropriate skills across national and language boundaries. In 1950, only 5% of the American gross national product depended on international trade; while in 1980 that number had risen to 17%. Almost 70% of American goods now have foreign competitors. These changes necessitate that American business persons bring increased understanding of differing cultural perspectives to their negotiations and to their work. Graham and Herberger (1983) stress the critical need for American international business negotiators to improve their skills. Education in the liberal arts almost insures that students will have been exposed to ideas different from their own. Moreover, liberal arts training allows students to realize that other persons or cultures can have different perspectives on the same issue, and all may be right. These qualities which can be learned in liberal arts classes are well suited to meeting the needs of business in an increaingly

international business environment.

Third, narrow vocational skills become obsolete quickly; but skills in liberal arts (e.g. critical thinking, oral and written communication, logical analysis) do not become outdated. As in the past, liberal studies, although they are not specific in their vocational application, are eminently useful in work. Specialized undergraduate programs prepare students well for their first jobs, but liberal arts study prepares students better for a lifetime of work. Both skills and attitudes gained in liberal arts study offer flexibility to their holders in subsequent professional work. Attitudes such as appreciation of cultural and ethnic differences, respect for excellence, and understanding of the creative process -- all are valuable to employees and their employers.

Fourth, liberal arts study encourages students to have a sense of broader perspective on problems and decisions, a sense which serves them well in the personal and professional lives. Roger Smith, Chairman of the Board of General Motors, in a speech given at Northwestern University, noted the need for workers to have a sense of perspective which he called "stewardship." In his pleas for a broader ecological awareness, he noted that liberal arts graduates were lilelier to have this broader perspective which they could bring to the decisions which they need to make on the job. A cartoon printed in Wall Street Journal pictured two business persons talking, one commenting "What I find so hard to accept is that there are two sides to every issue." A liberal arts graduate would go further and realize that there are probably many more than two sides to the issue. Morover, the liberally educated person would be more likely to realize

that decisions have complicated consequences.

Fifth, while science and technology are, in a narrow sense, neutral, their application involves profoundly moral issues. Technicians who have received extensive hands-on training without having considered the ethical implications of their activities are dangerous in their ignorance. Liberal arts study, in its best form, provides dynamic opportunities for continued examination of those difficult ethical questions. Ultimately, all lives and all professional decisions are more than adaptational responses to external events; and the liberal arts afford us the opportunity to ponder that elusive larger whole that influences us in such complicated and powerful ways.

Colleges and universities need to stand firm amid the pressures to structure curricula in ways that move courses toward vocational training and away from a thorough grounding in the liberal arts. Liberal arts courses teach essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that serve persons well in all vocations. Moreover, they foster an awareness of differences, an awareness that is especially important as business becomes more international in scope. Finally, because liberal arts education encourages critical reflection on ethical issues, it provides a broader perspective to its students which, in turn, allows them to meet the challenges of their vocations with skills and attitudes which will not become outdated.

Robert Hutchins summarizes well the centrality of liberal arts in the education of all individuals. He writes, "The liberal arts are not merely indispensible; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question

open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one."

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